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ABSTRACT

A 6-month consultation process was conducted to identify changes needed in Ireland's system of adult education in the era of lifelong learning. The following issues were addressed: (1) financial barriers for adults wishing to return to education; (2) the lack of access to mainstream programs of education and training; (3) the lack of information and guidance services to meet adult learners' needs; (4) the lack of properly funded childcare facilities; (5) the discrepancy between opportunities available to long-term unemployed individuals and individuals in low-paid jobs; and (6) the lack of progression routes from basic education to higher education and training programs and between the formal and nonformal sectors. The following were among the recommendations that emerged from the consultation: (1) current finance systems must be evaluated in the context of equality of opportunity, particularly for students in part-time or modular degree programs; (2) to permit upskilling of the existing workforce, paid educational leave should be considered; (3) adult education in the context of an expanded service must be based in locally accessible premises; (4) all adult education practitioners should have opportunities to participate in professional training; and (5) local communities must play a key role in developing their own education. (22 references) (MN)

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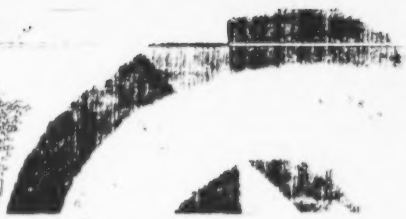

making an impact

The Aontas response to the Green Paper

Adult Education in an Era of Life Long Learning

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June 1999

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FOREWORD

In the thirty years since its foundation, AONTAS has witnessed, supported and participated in the multifaceted attempts of organisations, committees and individuals to create in Ireland the conditions necessary to make lifelong learning available to all.

The traditional commitment of the Irish people to education has been characterised by pragmatism: the awareness that, without education, social and economic survival and prosperity is improbable. However it has also been concerned with a commitment to the development of the human being and of civil society, issues which are becoming crucially important in a world torn apart by individualism, intolerance and civil unrest.

The last thirty years has seen a proliferation of new education and training opportunities, designed to enable Irish people to meet the challenges presented by the dizzying social and economic change that now characterises Irish society. The last five years, in particular, have seen changes of such rapidity and significance that it is safe to say they have changed the face of adult education in Ireland. In the process, they have been reshaping the environment within which adult education is taking place, restructuring its role and boundaries and redefining its potential and power.

While the endemic persistence of poverty, social inequality, exclusion and long term unemployment make a coherent adult education system an imperative of economic development, the role it plays in the development of values of justice, democracy and civil society is of equal importance. The current Green Paper has provided us with a unique opportunity to participate in the shaping of a policy to address the development of lifelong learning in a holistic way, not just as a means of utilising human resources for the benefit of capital.

In this submission AONTAS has addressed these issues, and urges the Government to respond quickly through the forthcoming White Paper. The Government must sieze the opportunity to invest in the development of a system that ensures education and training as a right for all its citizens, regardless of age, gender, physical status or social class.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AONTAS has conducted a major process of consultation with its member organisations and others in response to the publication of the Green Paper on adult education, **Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning.** This process is outlined in the introduction to our submission.

During that process, many voices were heard and opinions expressed. This document is the essence of the debate within our organisation over the last six months and represents a meeting of minds of the major stakeholders in the adult education sector.

As such, it is a pivotal document. We are confident that the results of our process, as represented in this submission, will inform national and local policy in adult education for many years to come.

The issues which have been identified during the consultation process are:

- Financial barriers for adults wishing to return to education
- The lack of access to mainstream programmes of education and training
- The lack of information and guidance services to suit the needs of adult learners
- The lack of properly funded childcare facilities
- The discrepancy between the opportunities available to the long-term unemployed and those in low-paid jobs
- The lack of progression routes from basic education to higher education and training programmes and between the formal and non-formal sectors

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Finance

AONTAS is calling for a ten-year development plan for adult education with adequate financial investment to support it. Currently the education budget stands at approximately £2800m, of which adult education and training initiatives receive roughly 2%. The Government must make a commitment to invest in the adult education service, bringing expenditure to at least 10% of the total education budget over a period of ten years. This is a modest demand given the strength of our economy, its projected growth and the need for sustainable development.

The development of services envisaged and outlined in the Green Paper is to be commended. Such developments will, however, remain aspirational in the absence of appropriate and sustainable funding mechanisms. Furthermore, funding should be channelled directly from the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) to the Local Adult Learning Boards on the basis of their Area Based Plan.

Lack of finance is a major barrier for adult students, and current systems need to be evaluated in the context of equality of opportunity, particularly for students engaged in part-time or modular degree programmes.

AONTAS is recommending that the self-financing rule be abolished as a mechanism to allow for systematic reinvestment in local education provision.

Access

The issue of accessing education and training opportunities, for those within the existing workforce as well as those engaged in home duties, is one which needs to be urgently addressed in the context of the development of the adult education services.

In order to create access to enable the upskilling of the existing workforce, Paid Educational Leave should be placed on the agenda for the next round of Partnership negotiations and mechanisms should be sought to implement relevant directives as a matter of urgency.

The lack of appropriate and affordable childcare is an issue that greatly concerns adult learners. Parents simply cannot participate in work, education or training options without it. AONTAS is currently reviewing the Childcare Strategy Report and recommends that the Government implement its findings into policy as a priority action.

Caring for older, incapacitated or disabled relatives has also been identified as a barrier to access. This should also be taken into account in the context of an expanded service.

The use of the Live Register as a method of assessing eligibility to programmes has, in the past, led to a disenfranchisement of women who would like to access programmes such as VTOS or FAS training. Where it is necessary to retain the Live Register as a method of assessing the extent of unemployment, its use in relation to accessing education and training should be abandoned in the interests of equal treatment.

The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs is currently preparing a report on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities. This report, to be published later this year, should be taken into account by the Department of Education and Science when considering future interventions.

The Department of the Environment has responsibility for issues of transport. This has been identified as a barrier in rural and isolated communities and should be addressed in a joint effort by both Departments.

Distance education has been cited as a way of diminishing barriers to access, particularly in rural and isolated communities. This can only become a reality if appropriate support structures are put into place for participants. These supports should include access to technology, outreach centres for meeting other participants and tutors, and assistance with finance.

Premises

Adult education in the context of an expanded service must be based in locally accessible premises. In many cases, existing publicly owned buildings could be made available to local providers and supporting services. This facility should be extended without charge and inclusive of adequate insurance cover.

Professionalisation

All practitioners of adult education should be given the opportunity to avail of professional training, which should take account of the previous qualifications and/or experiential base from which adult educators come, and designed to meet their particular needs.

Professional qualifications should be placed firmly within the remit of the National Qualifications Authority, its awarding bodies and the proposed Inter-Agency Working Group on Professional Qualifications for Practitioners of Adult Education.

The Forum for Practitioners, in its initial stages, could provide a voice for practitioners and has the potential to develop as a representative structure for them.

Accreditation

The National Adult Learning Council (NALC) must have complete parity of esteem with other statutory and educational bodies, including a cross-representation between NALC and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) structures. Furthermore, community education must have greater definition and recognition within the statutory sector and information on how it can best interact with the formal system and vice-versa.

The NQAI must develop mechanisms for the Accreditation of Prior and Experiental Learning (APEL), the delivery of modular, outcomes-based programmes and a Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS).

The NQAI must be granted broader powers in relation to the access, transfer, progression and mobility obligations of the existing University sector. Failure to achieve this could result in even wider gaps between the accreditation frameworks.

Structures

A phased development plan for adult education over the next ten years should be put in place, to include adequate and realistic financial investment. To this end the establishment of effective structures, particularly at local level, is crucial.

Local Adult Learning Boards must be established on a statutory basis. They need their own budgets, autonomy and decision-making powers. Their Area Based Plan should have a three year span, with reviews and evaluation. The plan should be monitored and evaluated by NALC.

The role of the Adult Education Organiser (AEO) should be clearly defined as a Co-ordinator of Services in his or her area. He or she should also have a staff-team working at Local Board level, all of whom should have expertise in their areas. These should include, as a basic minimum, a Literacy co-ordinator, a Community Resource Worker, a Guidance and Information Officer, a Staff Development Officer and an Administrator.

In relation to the development of adult education services in second-level schools, AONTAS recommends that a full-time teaching post, where appropriate, or a post of responsibility be allocated to the co-ordination of adult education.

While there was no consensus in the debate on structures, there is an argument for the Local Adult Learning Boards remaining within the structures of the Vocational Education Committees (VECs). In this case, the VECs should retain two seats on the Boards, while ensuring adequate representation of local stakeholders on a transparent basis.

Executive functions, to include policy development and a national budget for adult education should be seen as a priority for the National Adult Learning Council. Budgets to be administered by NALC could include Adult Literacy & Community Education Scheme (ALCES), Special Initiatives for Disadvantaged Adults Scheme (SPIDAS), Vocational Training & Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) and Youthreach, but it should also have new budget lines for development of new services and a capital expenditure budget. Staff of NALC should reflect the staffing structures at local level in order to offer a support base to local staff.

Four members of a 12 member NALC should be elected from the Local Adult Learning Boards.

Community Education

The role of local communities in the development of their own education must be recognised as a legitimate and important part of the jigsaw that makes up life long learning. In particular, the role of women as key development agents in their own communities must be recognised and supported.

Community education operates at a number of levels and funding mechanisms must be organised in such a way as to promote sustainable growth. The funding must also support premises, training, management and information provision all of which are essential for the development of community based activities. In particular, community education needs and deserves a support structure in the form of key paid personnel to support local activities.

It is of crucial importance that communities are represented on the emerging structures, not just for adult education, but for local government and all other initiatives.

AONTAS *as an Organisation*

AONTAS has provided support and development to its membership as required for 30 years. In order to continue this important function in the context of the Green Paper and a subsequent White Paper, additional financial, human and physical resources will be a necessity.

INTRODUCTION

AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education, has publicly welcomed the publication of the Green Paper on Adult Education, **Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning**. It particularly welcomes the recognition of adult education as a key component of personal, social and economic development, and its political role with regard to issues of social inclusion and disadvantage. In an unprecedented era of economic prosperity, Lifelong Learning is crucial to the development of sustainable growth and to ensuring that human resources and abilities are utilised to the full. AONTAS sees the timing of the Green Paper and, indeed, the forthcoming White Paper, as an unprecedented opportunity to develop a coherent policy on adult education in the context of Lifelong Learning.

The Kenny Commission Report of 1984, **Lifelong Learning**, contained the precursors of many of the recommendations contained within the current Green Paper, particularly in terms of the structures it proposed. It highlighted other issues, such as the barriers adults can experience when attempting to access education for the second time or, indeed, for the first time. The need to address the concept of sustainable wellbeing through targeted measures, aimed at those most at risk of long-term unemployment, poverty and disadvantage was also discussed.

Over the past 30 years much has been written about the issues facing adult learners. AONTAS has been involved in the production of a number of pieces of valuable research into these issues. It has also been involved in two NOW Programmes, whose evaluations illustrated the level of need on the ground and the benefits of adequately resourced programmes. More recently, and on a multilateral basis, the Report of the Commission on the Points System, the National Anti-Poverty Strategy and the National Childcare Strategy Report have been published by Government, all of which could have a bearing on the evolution of a comprehensive system of adult education.

All of these documents and reports have highlighted the importance of adult education in the creation of a booming and vibrant society with the capacity to change in line with national policies and local needs, within a sound economic climate. All have stressed the need to be locally responsive within a framework of national objectives and agreed targets.

While there has been widespread welcoming of the measures outlined and recommendations made within the Green Paper, the membership of AONTAS is concerned that adult education is seen only in the context of economic development and that its role in the development of the person, community and civil society will be sidelined in the narrow, functional interests of our growing economy.

While it is understandable that demographic and employment trends set the context for many future developments, investment in adult education must not simply be an action designed to address particular needs in the short-term. It should rather be viewed as a long-term commitment to the development of a learning society, which allows for continuous access to education, training and development throughout life and which is underpinned by a philosophy of empowerment, equality and social justice.

AONTAS is calling for a ten-year development plan for adult education with adequate financial investment to support it. Currently the education budget stands at approximately £2800m, of which adult education and training initiatives receive roughly 2%. The Government must make a commitment to invest in the adult education service, bringing expenditure to at least 10% of the total education budget over a period of ten years. This is a modest demand given the strength of our economy, its projected growth and the need for sustainable development.

AONTAS *Consultation Process*

Between the beginning of January and the end of May 1999, AONTAS engaged in a broad and deep process of consultation among its own members and with many interest groups. A synopsis of the Green Paper was prepared in January and was distributed throughout the country.

A meeting was held in January of National Community and Voluntary groups and networks. Three Regional Consultation Meetings were held in February and early March in Longford, Limerick and Dublin. Three meetings were held in April with the Women's Networks involved in the AONTAS Women's Education Networks Development Initiative Project (WENDI) to elicit their specific views in relation to the effect of proposals on women. These took place in Galway, Dublin and Killarney. Meetings were also conducted with the following representative organisations:

- The Irish Business and Employers Confederation
- The Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- The Irish Vocational Education Association
- The National Women's Council of Ireland
- The Teachers' Union of Ireland
- The Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland/Joint Managerial Board
- The Adult Education Organiser's Association
- The National Adult Literacy Agency

We have also attended as many meetings as possible, including consultations organised by various Vocational Educational Committees, CORI, Age and Opportunity, the Combat Poverty Agency, the NCDE, UCD, the INOU, the Shanty Educational project and others. Unfortunately, time constraints have made it impossible to attend all the meetings to which we were invited. AONTAS has, however, provided support and advice to many individuals and local groups in developing their own submissions.

The consultation process consisted of a series of workshops facilitated using the following themes:

- The Expansion and Development of Services
- Accreditation
- Professionalisation
- Structures

Because of the strength of interest and feeling among community-based groups in the non-formal sector, we have included a section dedicated to community education and, within that context, community-based women's education.

SECTION 1 THE EXPANSION AND DEVELOPMENT OF SERVICES

The expansion and development of services as outlined in the Green Paper is to be welcomed. AONTAS is in broad agreement with the recommendations made in the Green Paper in relation to the extension of the Back to Education Initiative, the development of a National Adult Literacy Programme and the Mature Students Access Programme. However, such expansion will have practical implications in relation to a number of crucial issues, which are based on the principles of access and equality of opportunity.

Drawing upon the analysis of queries to the AONTAS Information Service over the past ten years, from its own research and the outcomes of the AONTAS consultation process, AONTAS has consistently identified the following as the main issues for adult learners:

- Financial barriers for adults wishing to return to education
- The lack of access to mainstream programmes of education and training
- The lack of information and guidance services to suit the needs of adult learners
- The lack of properly funded childcare facilities
- The discrepancy between the opportunities available to the long-term unemployed and those in low-paid jobs
- The lack of progression routes from basic education to higher education and training programmes and between the formal and non-formal sectors

In particular, AONTAS recognises that there are many levels of disadvantage and that the specific needs of different target-groups must be addressed in a particularly focussed way. These groups included people with disabilities, long-term unemployed men, older people, the travelling community, women and our growing refugee population. There is a particular concern that the people with the lowest level of basic skills be given priority in the development of adult education services. Such services shall involve imaginative and flexible approaches, underpinned by significant investment.

AONTAS welcomes the Government's commitment of £10m for the development of the National Adult Literacy Service. Increases to date have been significant, and increased funding on a phased basis shows a commitment to the development of this fundamental service. The statistics published by the OECD in its **International Adult Literacy Survey**, showing that 25% of our adult population had difficulties in prose literacy, have certainly contributed to the debate and the action that has followed it. It is now necessary to ensure that funding is deployed in a systematic, but nonetheless imaginative way targeting those who are experiencing the greatest difficulty and the worst effects of the poverty and marginalisation that literacy can affect.

While AONTAS believes that investment in the literacy service is necessary and timely, it also emphasises the need to invest in the expansion of the adult education service in general. Without a general investment students who challenge and overcome their literacy difficulties will not have progression options and others

who want to step onto the first rung of their ladder will be hampered to the detriment of the individual, their community, society in general and the economy.

Finance

The self-financing rule should be abolished in order to enhance local provision through systematic re-investment, thus increasing participation levels, especially among adults who are most disadvantaged.

In terms of local provision, one of the biggest barriers to participation in the past has been the self-financing rule. This rule has meant that reinvestment into local adult education provision has been hampered, as the adult education services are not free to provide courses that cannot be completely self-financing. It has meant that new courses have not been developed or run because of insufficient numbers, and it has also meant that the surplus funds from successful courses cannot be reinvested into the development of new courses and services. This has been a particular problem in rural areas, where population trends tend to mean that fewer adults are available to finance courses. Also, adults without the means to pay for tuition on self-financing courses have been unable to participate. AONTAS believes that the abolition of the self-financing rule would lead to an increase in the uptake and the extent of provision of educational courses, particularly in rural areas.

The current systems of student financial support should be re-examined to increase equality of opportunity for adult learners

Adults wishing to participate in higher education and distance education programmes or modular options, or who choose to study in formal night programmes are still not eligible for the Free Fees or Maintenance Grant schemes. Although it is the case that many of these learners are in full-time work and can afford to pay for their continuing education, or can avail of tax exemptions, this is not the case for many adults. This includes those in the low-income bracket and women engaged in home-duties without independent means. The extension of the grants and fees schemes to these adult learners should be investigated and implemented on a phased basis, giving priority to those most in need. The Back to Education schemes which support people receiving Social Welfare payments have proven to be successful for many adults, but research shows that more imaginative approaches need to be used to encourage the most disadvantaged back into education. Even with Social Welfare supports, lack of finance remains a barrier to participation.

In 1997, AONTAS conducted research into the Third Level Allowance Scheme administered by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, entitled **Everything to Gain**. This research indicated that participants who were supported through this scheme had an 84% success rate on their courses, with the majority attaining honours level qualifications. Of those who graduated, 43% entered into employment with a further 24% engaged in further education at the time of the survey. It is therefore clear that an investment in the education of adult learners is very worthwhile, with a high potential return to the exchequer.

AONTAS welcomes the inclusion of participants on Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses in the Free Fees and Maintenance Grants schemes operated by the Department of Education and Science. Furthermore, AONTAS sees this expanding area of further education as having huge potential for adult students, both in terms of attaining qualifications and accessing higher education options.

Paid Educational Leave should be put on the agenda for the next round of Partnership negotiations

The idea of Paid Educational Leave has also been flagged in the Green Paper. This option could be invaluable for many learners who wish to develop their skills within the workplace for promotional reasons or as a mechanism to develop transferable skills for the future. The International Labour Organisation developed guidelines on Paid Educational Leave in 1974, and Ireland is obliged to implement its recommendations. There is also increasing support from the European Commission for measures to increase the productivity of the workforce. It is important to recognise the educational and training needs of those already in employment, particularly low-paid employment, and allow for their development. AONTAS believes that Paid Educational Leave should be included for discussion in the upcoming negotiations to succeed the Partnership 2000 agreement.

AONTAS believes, in summary, that Lifelong Learning should be a viable option for everyone. It welcomes the proposals for the expansion of provision through VTOS and the Back to Education Initiative, targeted at people who are unemployed, but stresses the need to emphasise the importance of continuing education and training for those who are already in the workforce.

The Live Register

The Department of Education and Science should take the recommendations of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs report on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities into account in relation to education interventions in the future.

Furthermore, the use of the Live Register as the criterion for access to educational initiatives should be abolished in the interests of equal treatment.

The Live Register is used as a gateway to labour market programmes and many major Active Labour Market Programmes (ALMPs). For example Local Employment Services (LES), VTOS and certain FAS programmes include attachment to the Live Register as an access criterion. It is, in fact, also required that applicants be in receipt of an actual payment rather than sign on for credits. This method of determining need in order to assess entitlement to Social Assistance payments is based on an assessment of family income. The distribution of that income within the family is not taken into account, thus ensuring that women's eligibility in their own right is never assessed.

While the assessment of income as a determinant of eligibility for financial assistance is justifiable, it is neither just nor appropriate to use it as an indicator for accessing education and training opportunities.

Even when the Live Register attachment is not used as an access condition to services, it is used at times to prioritise applicants when demand exceeds the supply of available places.

The Green Paper has rightly emphasised the barriers faced by women who wish to re-engage with education, training or the labour market. It did not, however, highlight the exclusion of women by this particular barrier.

The Green Paper also states that priority access should be given to those in the 15-54 age group whose highest level of attainment is a Primary education and those in the 15-35 age group whose highest attainment is the Junior Certificate or its equivalent. It quotes an unemployment figure of 40,400 within those groups.

It is necessary to highlight the fact that, within these age groups, there are 42,800 women engaged in home-duties whose highest level of attainment is Primary education and a further 26,100 whose highest attainment level is the Junior Certificate or its equivalent. This gives a total of nearly 69,000 women who are classed as having a low level of educational attainment.

The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs is preparing a report on Access to Labour Market Opportunities for women. This report should be ready within the year and should identify issues of importance in relation to women accessing educational opportunities. Removal of the Live Register criterion could increase the educational potential of up to 69,000 women on programmes such as VTOS. It would also mean that an expanded service would need the capacity to cater adequately for the needs of this particular target-group. Also, the eligibility requirements for other mainstream programmes should be re-examined and expanded to end the Live Register requirement and so open access completely.

Childcare

Adequate, affordable childcare should be provided as a mechanism for access to education and training initiatives and the workplace. In this regard, the findings of the Childcare Strategy report should be implemented into policy at the earliest opportunity

The issue of inadequate and unaffordable childcare has been identified through the AONTAS consultation process as a major barrier to participation in the workforce and in education and training opportunities. The recently published study commissioned by the Combat Poverty Agency, **Women and Poverty in Ireland**, indicated an increased risk of poverty among women, particularly those who head up single parent families. The research highlights the fact that paid employment is the most efficient route out of poverty for women, especially those heading up households. It is essential, therefore, for women to have access to training, education and employment. Unless they have access to adequate, affordable and

appropriate childcare, however, it is unlikely that they will be in a position to fulfil their potential and escape the cycle of disadvantage and poverty.

In developing a childcare strategy, attention must be paid to quality in both facilities and training of staff. In this way children benefit to the full, giving them positive early experiences of education through play and ensuring that they are prepared to participate in and engage with the systems of formal learning in a classroom setting. This is of particular importance in disadvantaged communities where a tradition of formal education may not be strong.

AONTAS also supports the recently launched Childcare 2000 Campaign, which seeks the implementation by Government of a childcare strategy which:

- Equally values all children and their parents
- Ensures the support and provision of quality, regulated childcare services
- Prioritises the needs of children and families experiencing disadvantage and social exclusion.

AONTAS is examining the Childcare Strategy Report from the point of view of supports for the workforce and also in the context of the report of the Early Education Forum. Whatever the outcome of the Interdepartmental Working Group, access to childcare will be a necessary support in an expanded adult education system.

The Green Paper has pointed to the success of women's groups in the provision of community-based education options. This is due, in no small measure, to the fact that childcare has always been prioritised in this sector.

Transport

A major feasibility study should be conducted in association with the Department of the Environment so that the issue of transport is appropriately addressed.

Transport should be considered as possibly the greatest barrier to accessing educational options in rural areas. The Green Paper proposes that Local Adult Learning Boards should put area action plans in place, ensuring that the needs of the area are sufficiently met. This cannot be achieved in rural areas without a comprehensive transport system.

For many people living in rural areas, their centre for education can be up to one hundred miles from their homes. For those who cannot drive or who do not have access to a car, participation is not an option. If services are to be expanded to include provision during holiday periods and at weekends, the provision of transport is crucial to increased participation.

For older people and people with disabilities in particular, transport can be a huge barrier to participation. While older people may not necessarily want to participate in employment-related education and training opportunities, they must be afforded the same equality of opportunity as other groupings in society. They need to be able to share their skills as volunteers, a practice that has been ongoing for

years, particularly within the literacy movement, in local communities and among older-people's networks. Older people also want to continue to learn, demonstrating the true meaning of Lifelong Learning. AONTAS believes that this is to be welcomed, encouraged and supported.

Distance Education should be developed in the context of a framework of supports for participants.

The development of distance education programmes has been identified in the Green Paper as a measure with potential, particularly in rural areas. While this is potentially true, the participants on distance education programmes also need other kinds of support. The programmes are expensive. They require participation in residential courses, which is costly and time-consuming. They often require the use of technology as a backup. In the absence of courses and facilities to equip people to use technology, however, their value decreases significantly. Furthermore, participants in distance learning programmes need to have contact with other learners. This is an additional problem in rural areas because of the transport issue, where even commuting to tutorials is difficult. Without an infrastructure of supports and ancillary services to complement distance education programmes, their use is not going to make a significant impact.

Cross-Border Co-operation in terms of education is vital for the future of Adult Education in border communities.

People living in border counties can often access centres in Northern Ireland more easily than centres in the Republic. This raises issues regarding the recognition and transfer of qualifications, particularly in relation to the Open College Network's (OCN) system. This anomaly must be addressed not only in terms of accreditation but also in relation to the transport issue.

Premises

Existing publicly owned buildings should be available for the provision of local education initiatives and supporting services, without charge and with adequate insurance cover.

The expansion of the adult education services will have implications for the access to premises for adult education purposes. AONTAS believes that school buildings should serve the community by providing access to space and equipment, caretaking and ancillary facilities as a matter of course. If the expansion of services envisaged in the Green Paper is to become a reality, this means open access outside of school hours and terms as well as within them.

This, in turn, has implications for the provision of ancillary services, such as caretaking, catering and administration, as well as tutorial and advisory services.

All of these issues remain to be addressed practically. Teachers Unions, Boards of

Management, Parish Priests, Community Employment participants and supervisors could all be affected in unanticipated ways by the expansions envisaged in the Green Paper. It will be necessary to consult with all of these groupings and elicit their support if changes are to be implemented as outlined in the Green Paper.

Premises for locally-based voluntary groups has been a major issue for many years, especially for those groups who require access to suitable premises during daytime hours. In the absence of purpose-built Adult Education Centres, adult learners usually have to share facilities with other groups. Findings from the **Liberating Learning** research, conducted by AONTAS in 1991, showed only a minority of local groups (21%) hosted by VEC schools. The majority of groups carried out their work in a variety of settings, ranging from Portokabins to Parish Halls. Private houses were used by 15% of the groups surveyed.

A review of this research in 1996 showed no significant changes in the situations of the groups surveyed.

AONTAS recognises that many schools do not have the existing capacity to host adult education provision during the day. If this is truly the case, capital resources must be made available for the provision of adequate premises which are adult-friendly. An example of such a model is the Dublin Adult Learning Centre, which provides a range of activities for adults in the centre of Dublin, including childcare facilities.

When groups succeed in accessing school premises there can be additional problems. In many cases there is no security of tenure, nor any sense that adult learners have a right of access to publicly owned buildings. There are also many adult learners whose early school experiences have been negative, making them less likely to participate in adult learning opportunities conducted within a formal school setting.

Many locally based groups receive small grants in aid from various sources to fund their programmes. They are often required, however, to pay rent from their grants to support provision. In addition to rent, 22% of the groups surveyed by AONTAS had to pay their landlord for lighting, heating, cleaning and caretaking.

One of the disturbing findings of **Liberating Learning** was that one in three groups did not have insurance. In some circumstances the school or proprietor of the building they were renting covered the groups' activities. Nevertheless, there appears to be some doubt for many groups as to who is covered, what is covered and who is responsible for insurance. Although 90% of the groups who had insurance said they had no difficulty in getting it, this was not borne out by those who did not have it. As one of the groups pointed out, it is not possible to get insurance cover unless you have a fixed address. Another group said that they had difficulty in obtaining insurance cover for children under two and so had to limit the crêche to those over two.

AONTAS is strongly recommending that locally based groups be supported through access to adequate premises and insurance without having to deplete their programme funding.

Resources

Local provision requires financial, human and knowledge-based resources in order to realise an expanded service of Adult Education

Expansions in education will, as a matter of course, place a further strain on already inadequate resources within all sectors. Member organisations of AONTAS are fully in favour of these expansions, but genuinely concerned that their capacity to facilitate change may be hampered due to resource implications. Resources can be human, financial or knowledge-based. Groups are acutely aware of the fact that they do not have the staff to administer expanded programmes, the resources to carry projects to fruition or the information to properly develop programmes or assist participants. All of these resource implications will have to be costed and budgeted for if expansions are to become a reality. AONTAS has proposed a baseline local infrastructure of staff needed to deliver services in a coherent way. This is outlined in the section on structures.

Information, Guidance and Counselling Services

Information, Guidance and Counselling services for adults should be established at local level in association with the Local Adult Learning Boards.

Professional training and support services should be put in place for personnel involved in the provision of such services.

AONTAS supports the recognition in the Green Paper for locally based educational guidance and counselling services. While the Local Employment Services provide information guidance and counselling for those who are unemployed, there is a gap in provision for people outside this target group. In particular, the needs of people in low-paid employment need to be addressed. Often their only option is expensive private guidance, which is limited in its availability and difficult to access.

The work of the AONTAS Information Service over the last 10 years shows that there is a need for educational guidance and counselling services geared specifically towards the need of adults. The Information Service has also highlighted the numbers of adults who wish to upskill and access higher education options. AONTAS' involvement in its own Lifelong Learning Exhibition, the FAS Opportunities Exhibition and the Higher Options Exhibition shows, however, that many adults have simply no idea how to start accessing information on educational opportunities.

The research conducted into the Third Level Allowance Scheme, **Everything to Gain**, identified guidance and counselling services as a major issue for people returning to education. The work of the AONTAS NOW project also indicated that one of the major issues for community and voluntary groups is access to adequate guidance and counselling services.

Each local area should have Information Officers and people with expertise in guidance and counselling specifically trained to deal with adult needs. These people could also provide a link to the Local Employment Services and Training Agencies, creating a partnership between education and training services for adults in each area.

This service is of great importance to mature students accessing Third Level courses. The recent research **No Room for Adults**, which highlighted issues affecting mature students in University College Dublin, indicated that those adults who discontinued their studies did so for quite specific reasons. These included unexpected difficulties in reconciling home, financial and study commitments and unrealistic expectations of the third level system of education. A comprehensive system of adult guidance and counselling for educational purposes would be of obvious benefit in assisting with these issues, enabling the student to reconcile his or her difficulties and continue with their chosen programme of education.

SECTION 2 PROFESSIONALISATION OF THE SECTOR

The section in the Green Paper dealing with professionalisation of the adult education service has led to much discussion and debate. While the AONTAS membership generally welcomed the development of professionalisation, there was a degree of contention as to what might be involved. For many of its members, especially those working in the non-formal sector, the perception of professionalisation seemed to centre on traditional, formal teaching qualifications for second-level education. This perception appeared to be at the root of a great deal of apprehension within the sector that the skills many adult educators have gained through experience, or the qualifications gained through non-accredited training would be ignored as paid, professional positions became available. AONTAS recommends that:

All practitioners of Adult Education should be given the opportunity to avail of professional training, which should take account of the previous qualifications and/or the experiential base from which adult educators come, and be designed to meet their particular needs.

There are four broad groups of adult education practitioners currently working within the service:

- Volunteer tutors, who are working within a variety of adult literacy and community based projects, who may have taken short training courses run by the particular project
- Part-time, paid tutors or facilitators who have learned their skills through experience or who have gained qualifications through non-accredited, community based training
- Skills tutors who are competent in a technical skill but who do not necessarily have a teaching qualification
- Teachers working within the formal sector who have a postgraduate qualification in education. This group might also include those educators who have acquired a qualification in adult education. In the case of teachers in higher education, no teaching qualification is required.

The adult education service has grown in an *ad hoc* way, leading to the involvement of a wide range of practitioners. While this has sometimes been problematic, nonetheless it has allowed for a greater flexibility and richness which has enabled people to grow and flourish at their own pace.

Adult education has long prided itself on its learner-centred approach to education and on its underpinning philosophy of participation and empowerment. It has been characterised by a distinct emphasis on the needs of the learner, developing its curricula and methodology to meet these needs.

The learner-centred philosophy, methodology and curricula of Adult Education must be preserved in the context of the professionalisation of the service.

AONTAS believes that it is desirable that all practitioners of adult education should be required to train specifically to deal with the needs of adults. This can be achieved in a number of ways, taking account of the differing sets of experience and qualifications identified above.

For those who progress through the formal education route and train as teachers, modules of training in adult education philosophy and methodology should be incorporated into courses such as the Higher Diploma in Education.

In the case of teachers who have already been working in the second-level education sector and are now required to work with programmes such as VTOS, PLCs etc., in-service accredited modules of training should be provided. This may require that the teacher be released from teaching duties and, in that case, employers should support such release. The teachers concerned should not be at a disadvantage with regard to salary and conditions of employment.

For adult educators who have gained their experience through practice, models of APEL should be developed to accredit this experience. This would require specific resources in terms of financial support and mentoring. There is already much excellent work being done within the community and voluntary sector by community based training and support agencies, such as CAN, Meitheal and others. Their work should be examined with a view to developing pilot-models of accreditation.

Throughout the NOW Project, 1991-93, AONTAS used portfolio-building techniques to accredit prior learning for participants wishing to work in the community. This and other models could be examined as a way to develop qualifications through APEL approaches. In order to do this, however, the community and voluntary sector needs resources and support. Volunteer tutors who currently do short, part-time training courses need to be supported by qualified resource people to ensure quality of practice.

It is important, therefore, that the new National Qualifications Authority of Ireland ensures that the needs of the community and voluntary sector are represented and supported. AONTAS would recommend that the new Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) would engage expertise from the community and voluntary sector to assist with the development of qualifications for this sector.

Of particular importance is the issue of parity of esteem between the statutory and voluntary sector with regard to professional qualifications. A partnership approach would ensure that Adult Education retains its richness and flexibility while assuring the quality of the service.

Coupled with the development of a qualifications framework is the evolution of a career structure for adult educators, giving security of employment and equal status within the education system as a whole.

The Green Paper rightly states that many good and committed practitioners have been lost from the sector because career opportunities do not exist. Contracts of employment, terms and conditions, training needs, networking needs and remuneration must all be clearly defined if the sector is to provide stable growth opportunities for its employees.

Inter-Agency Working Group on Professionalisation

The Green Paper proposes an Inter-Agency Working Group to progress the issue of formal recognition of qualifications for adult education practitioners. In the light of the previous recommendations relating to parity of esteem between the statutory and voluntary sectors, it is of the utmost importance that the community and voluntary sector is represented on this Working Group.

The linkages between the Inter-Agency Working Group and the newly established National Qualification Authority of Ireland and its awarding bodies should also be clearly defined. As professional qualifications are to be placed within the remit of these bodies, access, progression and mobility routes must be clearly developed and defined.

Forum for Practitioners

The Green Paper also proposes a Forum for adult education practitioners. AONTAS is in support of such a Forum. It should, however, be diverse in its membership, and inclusive of practitioners from both the formal and non-formal sectors. As the adult education service expands, it will include a diversity of staff with a wide range of skills, qualifications and experience. The Forum for Practitioners, in its initial stages, could provide a voice for these practitioners and has the potential to develop as a representative structure for them. This has implications for existing Trade Union structures in the future.

In order to fulfil its functions as defined in the Green Paper, the Forum will need to be adequately resourced with premises, staff and a development budget.

SECTION 3 ACCREDITATION

AONTAS welcomes the publication of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill in March of this year. We firmly believe that the speedy development of a National Framework of Qualifications is crucial to the consolidation of the adult education sector and, more importantly, to the evolution of a society which places the practice of Lifelong Learning at its centre.

AONTAS is convinced that an evolving qualifications system must revolve around the needs of learners. This necessitates due recognition of the experiences of everyone participating in the continuum of education, regardless of their age, gender, physical status, socio-economic status, ethnicity or geographical location.

In particular, recognition must be given to the educational provision in the community and voluntary sector. Organisations within this sector work within a very definite ethos.

The ethos of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness must be preserved and incorporated on a partnership basis between the formal and non-formal sectors.

Currently, the education programmes within the community and voluntary sector are essentially driven by the target groups and often address the broader issues of social inclusion and poverty. They do not, therefore, often fit easily into the conventional modes of accreditation and certification. A recent research report **Towards an Integrated Accreditation Framework,** commissioned by the Community and Voluntary Accreditation Forum (CVAF) and funded by the Combat Poverty Agency, examined the practices and standards of five Practitioner Learning Programmes (PLPs) delivered within the sector. Section Three of the research report, on the findings, standards, and practices of the PLPs described elements of the programmes as follows:

- *Acceptance and use of numerous learning settings (e.g. community, work, college, home)*
- *The design of assessment procedures aimed at giving credence to a variety of types of human intelligence*
- *Flexibility on the part of tutors to deal with a variety of participant types (e.g. varying ability levels across a range of intelligences)*
- *Addressing tutor/participant power relations by establishing two-way communication*
- *Employing reflective strategies by all involved in the learning process*
- *Ongoing monitoring to allow for early detection of difficulties, thus ensuring that strategies are put in place to respond to these difficulties*

The above measures reflect the principles of Lifelong Learning. If these principles are to be embraced fully by the sector, there needs to be extensive support put in place by those with real decision-making powers, i.e. education and labour-market policy-makers, programme designers, evaluators and, above all, funders.

The findings of this research provide valuable information on community-based education and could be used as a starting point for the development of an inclusive accreditation framework.

Parity of Esteem for providers of community-based education programmes with those providers operating within the statutory sector, including designation as providers for the purposes of accessing appropriate certification for their programmes, is a necessity.

In relation to the work of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, AONTAS is making the following recommendations:

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland must develop, as a priority activity and within a maximum timeframe of two years from the date of its inception, a comprehensive system for the accreditation of prior and experiential learning.

In the research report *Can You Credit It?* (1994), the following recommendation was made:

'Learners, providers and tutors recommend the establishment of routes at a variety of levels leading to accreditation. Daytime education groups, representatives of PESP companies, community development groups and several AEOs in the VEC point to the importance of providing experience-based routes. Unless these routes are built into the national systems and college systems then it will be impossible for those from disadvantaged communities to gain credit for skill and knowledge outcomes developed through informal education courses and programmes in the voluntary sector. It is essential that routes to accredit prior learning and achievement be also built into accreditation models.

A move towards accrediting prior learning and learning outcomes gained through experience might shift the focus from the perception of those who are unemployed as unskilled, by giving long overdue recognition to the skills and knowledge which people who are not in paid work have developed, in spite of the marginalisation they experience'.

This recommendation still holds true in relation to the development of accredited models of prior and experiential learning.

Modular, outcomes based programmes of assessment should be developed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, in tandem with APEL programmes, to enable learners to access and progress through the new framework.

Credit Accumulation and Transfer systems must also be developed as a priority activity of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland to enable learners to transfer between programmes, frameworks and institutions with ease and clarity.

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland must be granted greater, meaningful powers in relation to the access, transfer and progression obligations of existing universities if coherence is to be achieved between the frameworks.

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill defines the role of existing universities in relation to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in a different manner to that of universities which may be designated under Section 9 of the Universities Act 1997. AONTAS believes that existing universities should have the same obligations as future universities in order to properly define and manage progression routes, quality systems and transfer mechanisms between frameworks. Linkages between the Higher Education Authority and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland also need to be clarified.

The issue of institutional rigidity and inflexibility within the university sector in relation to adults wishing to engage in designated programmes must be addressed as a matter of urgency. Only clearly defined pathways between the National Qualifications Framework and the university sector will alleviate this problem by systematically eradicating it.

Issues surrounding the professionalisation of the adult education sector have been dealt with in a previous section.

The National Adult Learning Council must be given complete parity of esteem with the new National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and other statutory educational bodies.

This can be achieved in the following ways:

- The National Adult Learning Council must have representation on the bodies proposed under the terms of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Bill.
- The chairperson of NALC should, in the same manner as the chairperson of the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, be the NALC representative on the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.
- The Chief Executive Officer of the NALC should represent NALC on the Further Education and Training Awards Council and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council.
- The Chairperson of the National Adult Learning Council should sit on the Higher Education Authority.
- NALC should also be given full representation on task forces, commissions and policy development bodies, both existing and to be formed, within the context of Lifelong Learning principles and practice.

SECTION 4 DEVELOPING STRUCTURES FOR ADULT EDUCATION

The Green Paper's Chapter on Structures identifies a number of issues relating to lack of identity and status of adult education, as well as lack of co-ordination and communication between the sector and other training and education sectors.

AONTAS is in agreement with the Green Paper in relation to the issues identified, and that they need to be addressed by systematic investment on a phased basis.

AONTAS recommends that a phased development plan for Adult Education over the next ten years, including adequate financial investment, be put in place. In this regard the establishment of effective structures is crucial to its success.

Local Structures

In order to work effectively, local structures will need to ensure that local needs are taken into account. Currently the *ad hoc* Adult Education Board structures work inconsistently across the country. The main reasons for this are already identified by the Green Paper, namely lack of autonomy and decision-making powers, no budget apart from ALCES and narrowness of representation from the stakeholders involved in adult education. An additional difficulty has been the lack of clarity of the role of the Adult Education Organiser and the boundaries of his/her brief. There is a question as to how AEOs relate to providers who are not operating within the VEC system and how their role has evolved since they were established in 1979.

Currently a number of agencies are involved in adult education and training, accessing funding from a wide variety of sources. The Green Paper identifies a range of such providers. It has also identified the functions and principles underpinning the operation of local boards. AONTAS is fully in agreement with these as outlined in the Green Paper. There was a high level of consensus from the membership consultation with regard to these named functions and principles.

In particular, Local Adult Learning Boards need autonomy, their own budgets and decision-making powers. Their priority will be to develop an Area Based Plan for the development of Adult Education services, based on assessment of local needs. AONTAS would recommend a three-year development plan with in-built reviews and evaluation. In order to deliver services, the starting point for investment is an infrastructure on the ground. Without such an infrastructure the recommendations in the Green Paper on the expansion of services will remain aspirational.

An Infrastructure for Adult Education

The Adult Education Organisers role should be clearly defined as a co-ordinating role for Adult Education services in his/her area.

A number of crucial service areas have been identified within the Green Paper relating to access to Lifelong Learning. These include literacy provision, information, guidance and counselling, training and capacity-building for community based groups, curriculum development, accreditation and progression and professionalisation.

The AEO needs therefore to co-ordinate a staff-team with expertise in these service areas. As a basic minimum such a team would include a Literacy Co-ordinator, Guidance and Information Officer, a Community Resource Worker, a Staff Development Officer and an Administrator. In many local areas a number of these people already exist, but have no security of tenure.

Depending on the needs of a local area, the staff team would be identified accordingly. The Adult Education Organiser would be responsible for his/her staff team. The staff team would have clearly defined job descriptions and appropriate conditions of employment to ensure the development of the service. The members of the staff team must have access to professional training and support to enable them to carry out their functions effectively.

In relation to the development of Adult Education services in second-level schools, AONTAS recommends that a full-time teaching post, where appropriate, or a post of responsibility be allocated to the co-ordination of Adult Education.

Mechanisms should be put in place to enable school-based adult education co-ordinators to liaise and network with each other and with the local AEO in order to provide lines of communication to the Local Adult Learning Boards. The staff development needs of school-based co-ordinators should be met within the context of the local infrastructure. They should be included in all consultation processes in relation to area based plans.

The adult education service team should carry out the work identified by the area plan devised by the Board and it should provide feedback to the Board in relation to the progress of the plan.

Representation at Local Level

During the consultation process, the issue of local representative structures generated much discussion and debate. There is still a lack of consensus among the statutory and voluntary sector membership with regard to models of representation. There are arguments for and against establishing extra new structures for the development of adult education locally. We would recommend

that, as a starting point, some of the models of good practice by existing local boards be examined to see how they work. Given the forthcoming reform of the VEC structures and the changes that such reform will imply, there is an argument for Local Adult Learning Boards continuing to sit within the VEC structures. It was felt that for accountability and administration purposes that this could be expedient. If this were the case, then AONTAS would make the following recommendation:

The Vocational Education Committees would be required to ensure that the stakeholders as outlined within the Green Paper are represented. The VEC would therefore retain two seats on the Local Adult Learning Board and would seek representation from local stakeholders on a transparent basis.

The recommendations in relation to the Adult Education Boards as identified in the Kenny Report **Lifelong Learning** are still very relevant in this regard, in particular its suggestions for mechanisms for representation on the boards

The notion of an annual consultation assembly in each area, also proposed in the Kenny Report, involving all interested parties in adult education is a good way of developing lines of communication for feedback to the National Adult Learning Council. Also, the recommendation that one-third of the representatives on Adult Education Boards be replaced every three years ensures that new ideas and expertise are open to the Board.

One of the main issues of contention is representation for the community and voluntary sector on the Local Adult Learning Boards. This is a particularly difficult issue as there are no formal, agreed representative structures within the sector as yet. In adult education terms, this sector includes a range of groups, such as locally based daytime education groups, women's groups, special interest groups an so forth.

The importance of capacity-building within the sector is critical to the development of representative structures. Therefore, the role of the Community Resource Worker, as defined in the section on Infrastructure, is extremely important. A major function of such a worker would be to support local groups to develop networks, and to build expertise among local people to ensure that their needs are represented. This is a developmental process which needs to be supported in a sustainable way over time, taking account of where local people are at (see section on Community Education). The role of the Community Resource Worker would be clearly defined, as would the mechanisms for linking with the local boards.

There was a strong feeling within the community sector and indeed among those providers outside the VEC sector, that new Local Adult Learning Boards with broad representative structures should be established. The Area Partnership Companies were cited as a model in this regard. However, if Local Adult Learning Boards were obliged under Statute to function in an inclusive way, with devolved authority and autonomy, many of the fears expressed by those providers could be allayed.

The Board members themselves should also be supported through training and induction to ensure that they can fulfil both their roles and responsibilities as Board Members and as representatives of their own groups and organisations. Such roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined at the outset.

National Structures

The proposal for a National Adult Learning Council was broadly welcomed by AONTAS membership. There was a strong consensus that the Council should be a Statutory, Executive Body and that its functions, as defined in the Green Paper, be supported.

The National Adult Learning Council must give priority to policy development and a national budget for Adult Education.

The budget might include some of the funding strands already identified in the paper namely ALCES, SPIDAS, VTOS and Youthreach. It must also include new budget lines for development of new services, the mainstreaming of pilot programmes, which have already been targeted at disadvantaged groups and supported, in many cases, by EU funds as well as a capital expenditure budget, which is crucial to the expansion and development of services.

The NALC also needs to have a strong support and monitoring role to ensure that Area Based Plans are implemented.

With regard to representation of stakeholders, the recommendation of the Kenny Report is interesting in that it suggests that half of the Council, as proposed in the Report would be elected members from Local Adult Education Boards.

AONTAS proposes that four members of a twelve-member Council would be represented by this mechanism. This would provide a direct link between National and Local structures and should be examined as a possibility.

Linking Local and National Structures

Local Adult Learning Boards should be required to draw up an Area Based Plan for a three year period. This should be done in consultation with local stakeholders co-ordinated by the Adult Education Organiser and his/her staff team. The Local Adult Learning Boards should then be required to submit their plans and budget proposals to the National Adult Learning Council, which should scrutinise them and fund them as appropriate.

Funding should be channelled directly through the Local Adult Learning Boards in accordance with their area plans. The progress and process of the plan should be monitored and reported by the Adult Education Organiser/Co-ordinator on an annual basis, and should be reviewed by the Local Adult Learning Board and the NALC at the end of its three years.

Executive Functions of NALC

While the Board will reflect the interests of the stakeholders as identified in the Green Paper, it must also have executive functions, including staff with expertise in the areas identified in the Green Paper and mirroring the infrastructure at local level.

These should include specialists in the areas of accreditation, information provision, guidance and counselling and capacity building with the community education sector. In particular one of the executive functions should be research, in order to ensure that good practice is documented and disseminated and that innovative approaches can be tried out on the ground. There are a number of models which could be examined in regard to the executive functions of the Council, for example the Combat Poverty Agency, Area Development Management and the Higher Education Authority.

SECTION 5 THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION

AONTAS welcomes the inclusion of community education in the Green Paper as a particular sector in the adult education service. However the community sector is neither homogenous nor coherent in its member groups and practices. Indeed, there is no consensus as to what constitutes community education. Within AONTAS there has been a huge expansion during the nineties of membership among voluntary and community groups, which now comprise the majority of membership. This sector contains a variety of locally based women's groups and networks, men's groups, Community Development Projects (CDPs), family agencies, centres for the unemployed, local interest groups and so forth. The philosophies and processes that underpin their work can be significantly different, as are their sources of funding and methods of working.

Defining Community Education

The Green Paper proposes two broad definitions of community education, which are fundamentally different. On the one hand community education is defined as a system of provision within the community. This includes the provision of learning opportunities by a range of institutions including schools, training agencies, universities, churches, local groups and others who make their premises and resources available to the local community. It also includes initiatives such as Home School Community Liaison Scheme, which is essentially school-based but which provides outreach services and links with parents in the community. The emphasis in this kind of community provision is one of opening access to individual adults to participate in adult education, and it does this very successfully. We recommend that such services continue to be supported and developed as part of the expansion of services generally.

The second way in which community education is defined is in terms of a particular kind of approach or process, which is rooted in the community and growing from it. It is a process of learning and growth, which initially might be sparked by individual needs but is essentially about the collective learning and development of communities. Its particular ethos of empowerment, social justice, change, challenge, respect and collective consciousness gives it its distinctive character. In particular it is concerned with building the capacity of local communities to engage in developing responses to educational and structural disadvantage and to participating in decision-making processes which effect the whole community. The processes and methodologies in which it engages are outlined earlier in this document in the section on Accreditation.

The Green Paper has identified a number of programmes: the European Anti-Poverty Programmes, Community Initiatives, Local Development Programme, Leader etc., which have supported a variety of projects whose work focuses on issues of social exclusion and poverty and which, in many cases, use education as a strategy for addressing these issues in a community context.

There is, therefore, a broad area of overlap between adult education and community development. The boundaries between these two areas of practice are often blurred, which has led to some difficulties in relation to funding. This is particularly evident in the case of local women's groups, which sprang into being in the late eighties and nineties.

Such groups have been traditionally supported by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs Small Grants Schemes and are providing important educational services, sometimes on their own and sometimes in partnership with other agencies. More than 1,000 of these groups operate at a local level and provide important access points for adults, especially those who have been unable to access mainstream programmes. As well as providing educational options for individual adults, they also engage in what could be described as community development and do not, therefore, see themselves as belonging in the traditional education sector under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science. This has led to difficulties in relation to the visibility of their work, access to funding, resources and representation. While many of the groups are women's groups, a large number provides a range of activities open to all members of the community. However, the groups are essentially managed by women who work in a voluntary capacity with little support but with great energy and enthusiasm.

What does Community Education Need?

Following the production of the last Green Paper on Education in 1995 AONTAS, in its response **'Into the Future'**, identified three key issues (Three Rs) pertaining to the development of community-based adult education, which still hold true for its future development. They were as follows:

Recognition

The role of local communities in the development of their own education must be recognised as a legitimate and important part of the jigsaw that makes up Lifelong Learning. In particular the role of women as key development agents in their own communities must be recognised and supported.

The recognition of the importance of locally based provision as a comfortable access point for people at the beginning of their return to education is crucial. It is also crucial that local groups be allowed to build their capacity to support learning in their communities and to develop links and progression routes to mainstream education and training. To do this they require resources.

Resources

Community Education operates at a number of levels and funding mechanisms must be organised in such a way as to promote sustainable growth. Future funding must include support for premises, training, management and information provision, all of which are essential for the development of community-based activities. In particular Community Education needs and deserves a support structure in the form of key paid personnel to support local groups.

Community education needs a variety of funding mechanisms, including starter-funding, core-funding and long term funding to promote and sustain growth and development. AONTAS, in the section on structures, has recommended that paid Community Resource Workers are an essential part of an infrastructure for the development of the adult education services. Such workers should be located within the Local Adult Learning Board area and may be employed by VECs, local networks or Area-based Partnership Companies, as appropriate. There are already examples of this practice in operation, for example Kildare VEC, Border-County Partnerships and Clondalkin Women's Network, among others. The role of the Community Resource Worker is crucial if community-based education is to thrive.

Ancillary supports must be provided in the form of childcare, study supports and, in rural communities, access to learning venues and transport.

These issues have been consistently identified, by the community groups within AONTAS membership, as major barriers.

The National Framework of Qualifications, currently being established, must develop systems to accredit education and work undertaken within local communities. It must endeavour, in partnership with local communities, to develop flexible progression routes, which will open up access across the various strands of education and training. This issue has been dealt with in detail in the section on Accreditation.

Research is also crucial to the development of the sector. Resources must be made available to document the activities of local community-based groups. This is a particular recommendation by the Green Paper which we strongly support.

Representation

Representation has been identified as an important issue by the community groups and has been dealt with in the section on structures. Unless the voice of those involved in community education is effectively heard and real partnerships are engaged in, community groups will continue to work in isolation from the mainstream.

It is therefore of crucial importance that communities are represented on the emerging structures, not just for Adult Education but for Local Government and all other initiatives.

SECTION 6 CONSULTATION WITH THE WOMEN'S EDUCATION NETWORKS

For the past eight years, AONTAS has had a track record of working with and supporting its locally based women's groups. It has engaged in two NOW projects, which have been evaluated and reported on by the organisation. Currently, AONTAS is engaged in a project, The Women's Education Networks Development Initiative (WENDI), funded by the Department of Education and Science's Women's Education Initiative, which has been in operation for one year. The WENDI project works with 12 networks of women's groups in Ireland who are members of AONTAS.

In April WENDI held three regional consultation meetings to discuss the work of the networks in relation to the Green Paper on Adult Education, in Galway, Dublin and Killarney. The following is the broad response of the women's networks to the issues raised in the context of the Green Paper.

Ethos of Community-Based Women's Education

The women's networks and their member groups are major agents of development for women, but they are clear that education is only one of the development tools employed by them. They are anxious to expand the range of programmes they offer and to further contribute to the development of their communities.

Many of the participants on these programmes have had negative experiences of formal education. Initially, women are attracted to educational programmes organised by the groups on the basis of the social benefits to be reaped and the level of enjoyment that education can bring, not merely as a mechanism to re-enter the workforce. However, through the development opportunities provided by these initiatives, many women are empowered to do so. There is a real fear that this ethos and emphasis on education for education's sake could be lost in the economic arguments that permeate the Green Paper.

The women's groups operate out of a particular philosophy of participation and empowerment and engage their participants at many different levels. These include developing self-confidence, becoming actively involved in organising collectively at community, regional and national level and taking up important leadership roles.

The consultation meetings with the groups identified the following important issues. Many of these issues are similar to those identified in the section on Community Education. However, due to the uniqueness of the work which women's groups engage in and their lack of visibility, it is important that they are re-emphasised in this section.

Representation and Decision-Making

The Groups firmly believe that, in order to have their work recognised, mainstreamed and developed, they need to be represented on the local structures proposed in the Green Paper, in their own right. Due to lack of resources, both

human and financial, within the groups themselves, and the absence in some areas of formal mechanisms to allow for election/selection to boards in a representative manner, such representation is hampered or ignored.

It is essential that gender balancing should be a feature of all current and proposed structures, but it must be recognised that women may need particular support to enable their effective participation.

The groups are in broad agreement with the need for a dedicated worker responsible for capacity-building the educational dimension of the community and voluntary sector at local level. This worker would assist groups in setting up structures, to include an education platform, to allow for the election or nomination of representatives, training for representatives and a mechanism for feedback to the platform.

The difference in emphasis between rural and urban communities has been highlighted in this consultation process. The networks believe that both communities should be represented on local structures if they are to be inclusive.

Funding

The majority of the existing networks are core-funded under the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs Grants Scheme. They are anxious that this arrangement, with its anti-poverty focus, should continue. They are also anxious that their education programmes access funding from the Department of Education and Science and that this funding be independent of their core-funding and inclusive of childcare.

The groups also stress that they require funding for the purchase or rental of dedicated premises for their provision, to employ appropriate staff to provide and administer their courses and to allow for their participation at local structural level. The issue of premises has been dealt with in the section on Expansion and Development of Services.

Support Services

The groups were very clear that expansion of services cannot be achieved without appropriate spending on supporting structures.

Childcare provision with an after-school service is necessary to give meaning to the option of flexible learning. Women's groups and networks have always provided childcare wherever possible, but with the current difficulties with regard to premises, insurance and trained personnel, this is proving to be more difficult. Allied to this are the problems faced by parents who need to access registered childminders, particularly in rural areas. In this context, other methods of supporting childcare must be developed. Childcare is an essential requirement if younger women are to be attracted back into education.

Transport is a major issue, particularly in rural areas. Either adequate transport must be provided to learners or provision must become more local so as to ensure ease of access.

The groups currently provide a limited information service to women on their education and work options. In order to enhance this important service they must be linked to the Information Services which should be developed within the Local Adult Learning Board structures as outlined in this submission. In this regard, the proposal for the development of an educational guidance and counselling service is welcomed by WENDI.

Professionalisation

Many of the networks have voluntary management structures. There is a fear that tensions could arise as a result of trained professionals beginning to work within these structures and that the work which has been successfully completed in the past by volunteers could be set aside, thus losing its local, needs-based focus. Training for management groups should be seen as a priority in this context, as should the provision of resources for the employment of paid workers who have previously been volunteers.

The employment costs of professional tutors could result in higher fees being charged to groups who are already stretched financially. Unless funding increases to allow these groups to employ qualified tutors, they may be forced to discontinue valuable programmes.

Volunteers have played a significant role in the running of centres and the provision of learning opportunities for many years. Their contribution must be valued and supported in a newly professionalised sector, and the groups should be supported by Government funding to resource completion of professional qualifications if they so choose.

Accreditation

Groups have traditionally found it difficult to attain certification for their programmes due to the fact that existing staff do not have the time, the expertise, the information or the funding available to them to explore accreditation options fully and in the time-frame available to them.

Many groups rely on community-based training agencies, such as CAN, Meitheal or the OCN for their certification. Recognition of these qualifications must be taken on board by the NQAI.

Women's Participation in Mainstream Programmes

In order to increase the participation levels of women on mainstream programmes of education and training, the barriers identified in relation to the Live Register earlier in this submission must be addressed.

SECTION 7 AONTAS AS AN ORGANISATION IN LIGHT OF THE GREEN PAPER'S RECOMMENDATIONS

AONTAS is now approaching its thirtieth year in existence and has seen many changes in the growth and development of adult education over those years. Some of these are identified in the AONTAS Strategic Plan, **A Vision for the Future.**

The Strategic Plan, which was developed in 1998 as a result of an intensive organisational review, provides a clear focus for the growth and development of the organisation over the next three years specifically and, in terms of its broad mission, core values and organisational aims, into the foreseeable future. While operating on limited resources, AONTAS has over the years made a significant contribution to the growth of adult learning as a key component of Lifelong Learning. It has provided fora for discussion, information support and outreach training for its member organisations and it has responded to emerging needs on the ground through its research, European funded NOW Programmes and a range of other pilot projects. It has also provided a political voice for adult education and has fed into policy development where possible.

AONTAS, as a membership organisation, has a key role in profiling and promoting adult education and, more importantly, has an independent status in relation to the various structures in adult education. In recent years, it has provided a vital voice for the growing community-based sector and has supported its growth, in particular the work of the women's education groups. During its organisational review, AONTAS identified the differing needs of the different sectors of membership and based its work for the next three years on this.

The importance of its promotional and policy development role spans all sectors and requires resources to continue to be closely in contact with providers, practitioners and participants. In this way AONTAS can facilitate the feeding-back of research and information to policy makers. Its Non-Governmental, non-provider status needs to be preserved in order to make AONTAS more effective in achieving its goals, particularly that of supporting and representing its members and articulating their needs.

Within the Green Paper, AONTAS has been identified as a major stakeholder in adult education and, as such, should have a representative role on the new National Adult Learning Council and the other new bodies to be set up under the NQAI. AONTAS is in a position to bring the voice of the adult learner to national fora and should be recognised for inclusion on these fora as a matter of course.

For many years AONTAS has provided a wide-ranging information service, both to individual adult learners and to organisations and agencies engaged in adult education provision. While it supports the development of information and guidance services for adult learners at local level, these providers themselves would need technical support to enable them to deliver their services effectively. AONTAS is in a prime position to provide such technical support in terms of research, information and training. It should, therefore, be resourced to do such work and to support the evolution of the adult education sector in the wake of the Green Paper.

Over the years AONTAS has survived on small core-grants from the Department of Education and Science, as well as a variety of once off funding for specific projects. While the last two years has seen significant increases in core-funding, the level of resources needed to meet the demands of members has never been really adequate. In particular, AONTAS has never been able to develop regional networks because of lack of financial, human and technical resources. People on short-term contracts or project workers depending on precarious funding sources have staffed the organisation. It has also moved premises ten times in its thirty-year life, affording only short-term leases on mainly inadequate premises.

In order to deliver on its networking, information provision, outreach development, research and publications potential, it needs to have a substantial increase in core-funding and a guarantee of long-term funding in order to plan ahead. Before the last General Election campaign, AONTAS sought a doubling of its core funding. In this submission we would reiterate this request and ask for the Department of Education and Science to phase funding upwards to keep up with the demands placed upon the organisation.

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